

**Statement of Congressman John Conyers, Jr.**  
**Briefing on the Impact of Slavery on Today's African Americans**  
**Wednesday, April 6, 2005**  
**1PM - 3PM / 2226 Rayburn**

Good afternoon. Thank you for joining me and other Members of the Congressional Black Caucus for a briefing on the impact of slavery on today's African Americans. As you may know, for the past 15 years, I have introduced the bill, H.R. 40. H.R. 40 will establish a commission to examine the institution of slavery, racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans in order to make recommendations to the Congress on appropriate remedies.

Today's dialogue will ideally enlighten some, as well as provide a deeper understanding for others, as to how the enactment of H.R. 40 can begin to heal a nation that has been divided on the basis of race for centuries. I would like to thank Kibibi Tyehimba of NCOBRA and Nkechi Taifa of the Open Society Institute, who were essential to the organization of today's forum. I would also like to thank the panelists, preeminent scholars and activists, who will be leading today's discussion: Dr. Mary Frances Berry, Dr. Richard F. America, Mr. Hilary Shelton, Mr. Derek Novell, Ms. Deleso Washington, Dr. Deadria Farmer-Paellman, Esq., and Dr. Ronald Walters.

Since I first introduced H.R. 40 in 1989, we have made substantial progress in elevating this issue in the national consciousness. Through legislation, state and local resolutions, and litigation, we are moving closer to a full dialogue on the role of slavery in building this country.

Across the nation, three state legislatures: Louisiana, California and Florida, have passed resolutions supporting H.R. 40. Another three states: New Jersey, New York and Texas, have legislation pending. At the local level, the legislation has gained similar support, with 12 major cities having passed similar supporting resolutions. Also, On Wednesday, March 9, 2005, survivors of a deadly race riot that reduced Tulsa's Black business district to ashes in 1921 took their case for reparations to the U.S. Supreme Court.

However, despite this progress, the legacy of slavery lingers heavily in this nation. While we have focused on the social effects of slavery and segregation, its continuing economic implications have been largely ignored by mainstream analysis. These economic issues are the root cause of many critical issues in the African-American community today, such as education, healthcare, and crime. The call for reparations represents a commitment to entering a constructive dialogue on the role of slavery and racism in shaping present-day conditions in our community and American society.

H.R. 40 is designed to create a formal dialogue on the issue of reparations through the establishment of a national commission to examine the institution of slavery. The commission will study the impact of slavery and continuing discrimination against African-Americans, resulting directly and indirectly from slavery, during the apartheid of reconstruction, desegregation, and the present day. The commission would also make recommendations concerning any form of apology and compensation to begin the long delayed process of atonement.

The issue of reparations remains sensitive in many communities because of the basic question of money. Statements dismissing reparations on the grounds of payment issues, however, are completely premature, especially when we have not yet had a national dialogue or study of the area. Economists have told us that the value of slave labor to the American economy and potential damages are greater than \$7 trillion. Such a staggering sum indicates that the discussion of reparations must be about something other than money.

However, I must stress that the reparations issue is not about a check to individuals. The call for reparations represents a commitment to entering a constructive dialogue on the role of slavery and racism in shaping American society. Everyone profited from the labor of the slaves, even later immigrants, because slave labor and the taxes from those enterprises built the infrastructure of this nation. The debt we talk about is not centuries old, but dates back only a few decades and is within our lifetimes because of Jim Crow.

This nation must make a commitment to understanding how the legacy of slavery and its vestiges contribute to present day societal and economic inequality. That is why I re-introduce H.R. 40 at the opening of every Congress, sponsor a forum on reparations during every Congressional Black Caucus legislative conference, and hold briefings like the one today. We must be diligent in our efforts to educate this nation about its history. I look forward to continuing today's conversation. Thank you.